

Last Child in the Woods spawns a social movement

by Ed Berg

Every so often a book comes along that captures people's attention because it illuminates a dimly perceived problem and issues a ringing call of alarm. In the 1950s wild birds were disappearing from yards and woodlands. Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* articulated this decline and pointed the finger at DDT as the culprit. In the 1990s Theo Colburn's book *Our Stolen Future* sounded a similar call about endocrine-disrupting chemicals in plastics and pesticides that cause reproductive disorders in many species of animals including human male infants. Both of these books aroused public indignation and generated a variety of remedial legislation.

Similarly, Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods* puts a finger the "nature-deficit disorder," where children today spend most of their time indoors and have very little contact with nature. Many of today's kids grow up on TV and computer games. Furthermore, parents have become increasingly fearful about letting kids play outdoors, especially away from the house in the woods or other undeveloped areas. This book strikes a very resonant chord in those of us who grew up playing outside, going camping, and generally hanging out in the woods and other unpaved places.

Being the father of a grown daughter in her mid-30s, I haven't been an active parent for quite a few years. I was only dimly aware that most modern kids are being raised quite differently than I or my daughter was raised. My parents didn't get TV until I was in high school, and I was far too busy with homework to watch TV. In primary school however I eagerly followed the radio adventures of the Lone Ranger, and Sergeant Preston and Yukon King, which prompted my grandfather (a stern old college professor) to admonish me against filling my mind with such trash. But the radio was only an hour or two a week, and most of my non-school daylight hours were spent outside building forts and tree houses, collecting rocks and bugs, and going for long meanders in the woods, with my buddies or by myself.

By the time my daughter arrived in the early 1970s, television had become a dominant cultural force in American life. My wife and I had serious doubts about

the effect of this force on people in general and children in particular, so we kept the TV watching for our daughter down to Saturday morning cartoons and *Little House on the Prairie*. All this was happening well before the home computer revolution of the 1990s and its digital derivatives such as Game Boys, Play Stations, and the World of Warcraft.

One of the more poignant quotes in *Last Child in the Woods* is from 4th grader Paul in San Diego who candidly acknowledged that, "I like to play indoors better, 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are." Comments like this send shudders down the spines of nature lovers. John Muir would roll over in his grave.

Louv's book has touched a nerve in parents and environmental educators around the U.S., and they are making all kinds of efforts to get the children out the door into the Great Outside. Richard Louv now chairs the Children and Nature Network and finds himself very busy speaking around the U.S. and appearing on radio and TV shows.

The call of the "No Child Left Inside" (NCLI) movement—and it has indeed become a movement—has been heard by various government agencies, as well as by Congress. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has its "Let's Go Outside program," the U.S. Forest Service calls it "More Kids in the Woods," and the National Park Service has its "Junior Rangers." Many states, starting with Connecticut, have passed "No Child Left Inside" initiatives. Most recently, the U.S. House of Representatives passed HR 3036, The No Child Left Inside Act, by a vote of 293 to 109. This act provides funds to state agencies for environmental education programs and for upgrading environmental literacy of teachers. A similar bill is pending in the Senate (S.1981).

I recently received a survey questionnaire from the Ecological Society of America, of which I am a member, inquiring about my childhood experiences that promoted interest in ecology and love of nature in general. The survey results will be used to plan a national meeting of ecologists in 2010 on the subject of uniting children with nature.

The NCLI movement seems to be going worldwide; the International Union for the Conservation

of Nature (IUCN) devoted a special session to “Reversing a World-Wide Trend: Strategies for Solving Nature-Deficit Disorder” at a recent World Conservation Congress in Barcelona.

Even on the Kenai—in the heart of the Great Outdoors, we like to think—parents and teachers are seeing too many children glued to electronic media during their precious few free hours not occupied with school, programmed activities, and homework. The fact that so many months of the year are cold and dark probably keeps Alaska kids indoors even more than in most of the Lower-48 states.

A recent “Connecting Children with Nature” forum in Homer, convened by long-time naturalist-educator Carmen Field, generated a wide-ranging discussion about the barriers to getting people outdoors, adults as well as children. Indeed, the barriers are formidable: busy schedules, over-worked parents, weather and the compulsive attraction of electronic media. One parent volunteered to start a “meet up” group with an e-mail list where people could announce outings that anyone could join, such as a hike down Diamond Creek, bird watching on the Spit, snow tubing at Ohlson Mountain, or a trip across the Bay. Several others volunteered to put together a short guide book of interesting places to go hiking. The emphasis was very much on involving both kids and parents in the activities.

I should say that we have some excellent family outdoor opportunities coming up at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge headquarters in Soldotna over the next few months. We will offer two guided fitness snowshoe hikes on Winter Trails Day, Saturday, January 24th; one for beginners (families and kids) with quarter-mile walk, starting at 11 am, and one slightly more advanced (for older youth and adults) two mile

hike at 1 pm. In January we will also be introducing all ages of homeschoolers to the art of snowshoeing (dates TBA), and we are working with the Kenaitze Indian Tribe Diabetes Prevention program to help people keep active during the winter months.

February 14th is the Refuge’s annual Winter Family Fun Day which highlights hands-on winter activities, crafts and snacks in addition to guided snowshoe walks. Winter school fieldtrip snowshoeing programs (grades four through six) will occur mid-February to mid-March and this year we will be piloting some 2nd and 3rd grade programs as well. Contact Education Specialist, Michelle Ostrowski at 260-2839 for more information on any of these programs (all snowshoe walks require pre-registration). If you have your own snowshoes or x-country skis, don’t forget that the Kenai Refuge Visitor Center has groomed trails open to the public all winter long.

With Christmas coming up, it can be a great family outing to cut a Christmas tree on the Refuge, keeping in mind that trees must be cut more than 150 feet from any road, lake, stream, trail, campground or picnic area, and not around the Refuge Headquarters or Ski Hill Road.

Last Child in the Woods is a fascinating read and I recommend it highly, not just for parents but for anyone concerned that our next generation of citizens has an active love of nature and a desire to protect it from the inevitable pressures of a more crowded world. There’s lots of information available on the Children and Nature Network website: www.cnaturenet.org.

Ed Berg has been the ecologist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1993. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.